

The Typography of El Lissitzky

L. Leering-van Moorsel

Around 1920 there was ferment in all of the arts. Lissitzky (1890–1941) developed his art during this period and was influenced by such men as Malevich (Suprematism) and Tatlin (Constructivism). His typographic innovations are individualistic and cannot be classified with any single “movement.” Lissitzky’s work and ideas on typography—of a pre-eminently pictorial quality—are summarized and illustrated.

A. General

By the early 1920’s a major change manifested itself in typography as, for that matter, it did in the other arts. This change was the upshot of developments that had been fomenting ever since 1800. They were aimed at emancipating the arts from the established, time-worn “form language” which had lost its functional impact in a changing society amidst a changing world.

The change, setting in around 1920, was precluded by several nineteenth-century trends toward a renewal of the arts. Of these, the Arts and Crafts Movement of William Morris and the Jugendstil must be named as having been of significant consequence for developments in the field of typography. Morris sought to achieve renovation by employing special letter types; the Jugendstil contributed asymmetrical composition. This alertness to the use of new materials was reflected in typography by a renewed interest in composing material.

The ensuing development in the plastic arts was also important to the situation around 1920, the time in which Lissitzky originated his typography. From Cézanne’s art emerged Cubism which, with Mondrian (the Stijl Movement) and Malevich (Suprematism), led to the abstract conception of pictorial art. Dadaism, which sprung up during World War I, flayed a society that had gone bourgeois. The dadaists were bent on using the new techniques of collage and montage, which were to affect typography.

These changes occurring in the world of art were paralleled by social changes of which the most striking were those taking place in Russia in the years between 1900 and 1920. As far back as 1900, the Russian art world was the scene of lively activities: witness the magazine *The World of Art*, which closely mirrored the new trends originating in Western art, and the existence of two major private art collections boasting more works by Picasso, Matisse, and other such masters than any Western collection at the time. But it was not only the developments in the Western world that fired art life in Russia, it was also what was happening at home. Around 1910 Kandinsky arrived at abstract art; Larionov and Goncharova initiated Rayonnism, while Tatlin prepared the ground for Constructivism. In 1915 Malevich ushered his Suprematism on stage.

Then, in 1917, Russia was rocked by the great Revolution; it swept everything before it. No wonder that it was hailed by the new art movements: they, too, envisioned a new society and, in fact, played a meaningful and functional part in it.

Lissitzky (1890–1941) belongs to the generation of, among others, van Doesburg and Moholy Nagy, i.e., the generation that welcomed the novel technical possibilities as a vital element of their art. On this score, they broke away from their spiritual ancestors, Malevich and Mondrian, whose work was chiefly committed to painting.

Lissitzky received part of his education in the Western world, viz., at Darmstadt. In this German town, from 1909 through 1914, he studied architecture and was graduated, with distinction, as an engineer. In those days, Darmstadt was a significant art center where such architects as Behrens, Olbrich, Hoffmann, and Loos were influential. Aside from architecture, Lissitzky was introduced to typography. At that time it showed the unmistakable hallmark of the Jugendstil, which was to influence Lissitzky's typography.

At the outbreak of World War I, Lissitzky returned to Russia where he started out as an employee of various architectural firms. But his was not to be a straight architect's career; his broad interest spurred him to embark on a wide variety of activities. His *oeuvre*—as shown in the 1965–66 exhibition organized by the Van Abbemuseum at Eindhoven, Holland, as well as in the book about him published at Dresden in 1967—includes works in fields ranging from painting, graphic art, architecture, and exhibition halls to typography; photography and even

motion pictures. His education as an architect, though, comes out in his every undertaking: in all his works we meet with a tectonic spatial order of things.

In the years 1917–1919, he illustrated Jewish books. A born Jew, he contributed in this way to a movement advocating a revival of Jewish national culture. In this context, Lissitzky encountered Chagall, considered leader of this movement, and who, in those days, had a telling influence on him. Through Chagall's intervention, Lissitzky was appointed a teacher of architecture and graphic arts at the academy of Witebsk, founded by Chagall. In 1919 Malevich was also asked to join the teaching staff of the academy.

The encounter with Malevich was of critical significance for Lissitzky, who was so impressed by his ideas that his work underwent a radical change. He no longer pursued Jewish national goals, but focused on the creation of a universal, generally understood form language. It is this work, created since 1919, that is of interest to us.

In essence, suprematic painting can be characterized as follows: by carrying Cubism and Futurism to their ultimate consequences, Malevich arrived at abstract painting. In a white field he set geometric color planes which, grouped or single, seem to float in an indefinite space; at the same time being, however, subject to a tension prevailing in that space. They are parts of an infinite space, the cosmos, with which Malevich equated space.

Lissitzky did his first abstract paintings in 1919. Malevich's influence is unmistakable. There are, however, also differences which indicate the very nature of Lissitzky's art. Whereas Malevich's canvases have a purely pictorial quality, Lissitzky adopts a constructive painting process. In Malevich's paintings we sense the ubiquitous presence of his compasses and ruler. Many of his geometric forms acquire volume: they become beams, cubes, and like elements. Lissitzky constructs, builds: his space is defined, limited. To him, the elements were signs *of* space, whereas to Malevich they were signs *in* space.

Lissitzky termed his painting "Proun"—a contraction of "pro" and "un." "Pro" is the Russian preposition "before," and "un" is an abbreviation of "Unowis" which again is a telescoped version of Russian words meaning "establishment of new art forms." He paraphrased the term as follows: "Proun is the station where painting changes for its next destination: architecture" (*Kunstismen*, 1925, p. XII); and

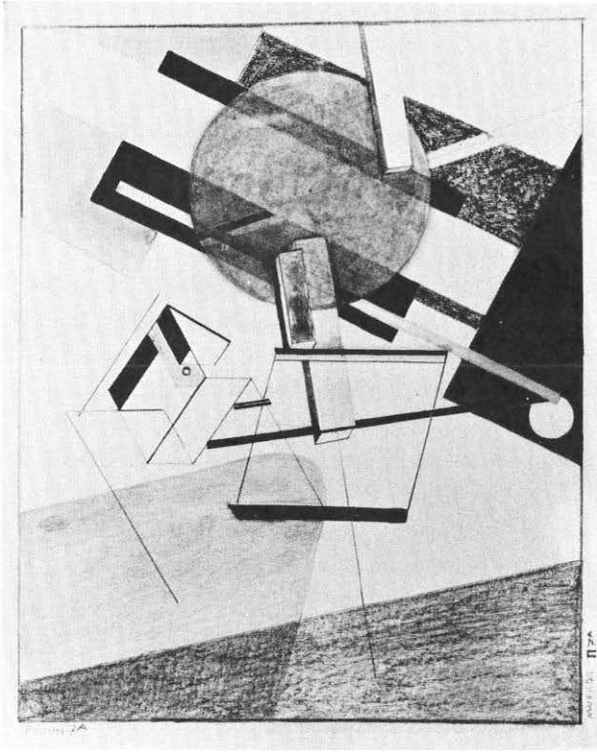


Figure 1. *Proun 7A*; about 1920; drawing, sealing-wax, gouache, collage; $7\frac{1}{8} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$ inches (18 x 14.1 cm); coll. Kunstmuseum, Basel.

“Proun starts out on the plane, progresses to spatial modeling and from there to building the objects of our world” (*De Stijl*, 1922, no. 6, p. 85). This accounts for the fact that his pictures impart a sense of concreteness to the viewer. It also points up Lissitzky’s intent to realize this quality by creating “objects.” On this score, he moved one more step away from Malevich who, consciously, kept aloof from any semblance and form of concreteness in art.

Lissitzky’s approach is allied with the constructivist movement headed by Tatlin. Tatlin and his adherents rejected the easel painting type of art as being a-functional in our present-day society: instead, they created a machine art. It was their avowed ideal to be able, as artist-engineers, to respond directly to specific social needs. They championed a “productive” art, harbinger of industrial design. Tatlin,

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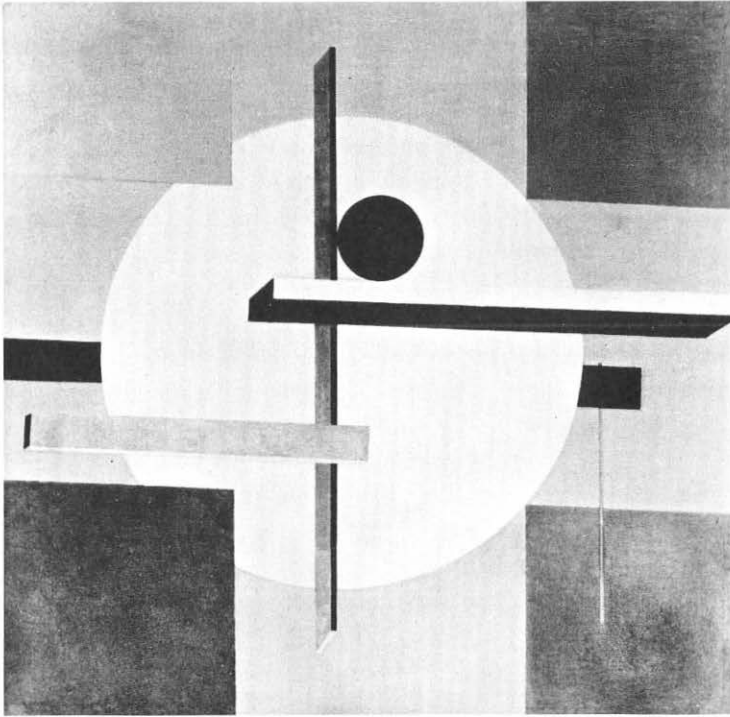


Figure 2. *Proun R.V.N. 2*; 1923; tempera and silvercolor on canvas; 39 x 39 inches (99 x 99 cm); coll. Städtische Galerie im Landesmuseum, Hannover.

as the most extreme exponent of this movement, translated his ideas into practice and sought employment in a metal plant.

Malevich could not endorse this stance; in his thinking, art was a spiritual endeavor designed to shape man's vision of the world. To work as an artist-engineer would imply that the artist comes down to the level of a craftsman. In 1921 the two philosophies were pitched against each other in public. Tatlin, riding the wave of sentiments in the face of the prevailing poor economic conditions, carried the day.

Lissitzky, conversely, convinced of the artist's functional task in daily life, was sympathetic toward Tatlin's vision. Yet he could not identify with it up to the hilt: his interpretation of the word "object" implied that it not merely covered "articles of daily use" but also a painting, a house, architecture, a poem, etc. In this perspective, he oriented his

activities toward society and wanted his art to act as an incentive. In fact, Lissitzky appears to have reconciled the Malevich-Tatlin controversy.

A notable example of his mediating posture is the *Figurinenmappe* (1923), a lithographic design for the opera *Sieg über die Sonne*. The scaffolding (Schaumaschinerie) with the mechanical puppets approximates Tatlin's machine art, but the form in which the designs are executed clearly testifies to an affiliation with Malevich. The accompanying text also bespeaks the dualism of Lissitzky's attitude. He writes that he only intended to make the design; the realization he wanted to leave to others.

In 1921 Lissitzky went to Berlin. In the years 1920–1930 he sojourned repeatedly in Western countries. In Berlin, at that time an avant-garde center, he met, among others, Schwitters, Hausmann, Richter, van Doesburg, Moholy Nagy, Arp, Mies van der Rohe, and van Eesteren. He came to know these artists intimately, wrote articles for van Doesburg's magazine *De Stijl* and for Schwitters' publication *Merz*; for the Nasci issue of this magazine, he did the typographic design. Jointly with Arp, he published, in 1924, the *Kunstismen*.

Through Lissitzky Russian trends found their way into Western Europe. There is, however, also a certain amount of cross-fertilization. When, for instance, in 1922 Lissitzky's painting went through a process of growing simplicity and clarity and, as from 1924, van Doesburg developed Elementarism, the effect of the close contacts between the artists is unquestionable.

It is certain that Lissitzky's repeated stays in Western countries greatly added to his growth as an artist: here he was able to develop without any extraneous curb, at a time when in Russia the modernly oriented artist was faced with mounting difficulties such as stifling state controls. After the first feverish flush of renewal in the early years following the 1917 revolution, the urge toward avant-garde art faded into the background. The new trend had failed to reach out to the average citizen and arouse his interest, and the adverse economic situation called for a refocussing of interests. Following his final return to Russia in 1930, Lissitzky was so frustrated by the dictates of the state regarding art, that the quality of his work dropped. An inveterate communist, Lissitzky must have felt it as a personal tragedy that the society which, to his mind, held the keys to the future, did not subscribe to his artistic creed.

B. *Typography*

It is plausible, that by the end of 1923, Lissitzky did his last painting. In his later canvases, the original complexity—generated by a concentration of a host of overlapping elements, all varying in direction—gradually disappears. The component elements assume greater independence and the spatial tension is more equably played over the entire surface. As a result, the plastic forms gain in clarity and simplicity. Similar aspects are apparent in his typographic work; here the dynamic element—a pre-eminently pictorial quality—plays an essential part. Lissitzky's basic philosophy underlying his typographic work purports that the typographic image should achieve for the reader what for the listener is conveyed by voice and gesture. He wrote some extremely penetrating and lucid essays on typography ("Typographische Tatsachen," 1925; "Unser Buch," 1927). In eight brief paragraphs (from *Merz 4*, 1923) he summarized the requirements of good typography:

1. Printed words are seen and not heard.
2. Concepts are communicated by conventional words and shaped in the letters of the alphabet.
3. Concepts should be expressed with the greatest economy—optically not phonetically.
4. The layout of the text on the page, governed by the laws of typographical mechanics, must reflect the rhythm of the content.
5. Plates must be used in the organization of the page according to the new visual theory: the supernaturalistic reality of the perfected eye.
6. The continuous sequence of pages—the cinematographical book.
7. The new book demands new writers; inkwell and quill have become obsolete.
8. The printed page is not conditioned by space and time. The printed page and the endless number of books must be overcome.

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In these eight paragraphs, couched in clear terms, Lissitzky set out the function of typography. In some of the paragraphs we read also confidence in the possibilities of the machine. At an early date, Lissitzky formulated here the task of the new typography. With these ideas, alongside his work, he has set the new course.

His early typographic work includes the illustrations of Jewish books, among which *Chad Gadya* (Fig. 3) *Ingl, Zingl, Chwat* (both from



Figure 3. *Chad Gadya*; 1919; litho; 9½ x 11 inches (24 x 28 cm); coll. E. Estoric, London.

Figure 4. Poster, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*; 1919.



1919) clearly bespeak Chagall's influence. In these books Lissitzky, obviously in the wake of the Jugendstil, aimed at achieving the integration of text and illustrations.

Later, after 1919, he originated a typography on the lines of "Proun." His opening work of this period was a poster (1919), *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (Fig. 4). Both this work and the picture-book *The Story of Two Squares* (invented and designed in 1920, printed in 1922) are, in terms of form, strongly influenced by Malevich's suprematic paintings. Aside from the striking affinity there is, however, also a marked difference: whereas Malevich utilized the vocabulary of an abstract form language, Lissitzky used the same abstract plastic means to the end of expressing something concrete (as in the "Proun" paintings the composing parts, designed to order space, have a concrete function). In the poster the red wedge smashes through the white circle causing the fragments to fly around. Something similar we observe in *The Story of Two Squares*. As in the poster, the minimal text is a functional part of the composition. In this context Lissitzky writes: "The key fact is here that the layout of word and picture is achieved with the same technical means, i.e., phototype, photography. . . . Consequently, we are confronted with a form of book in which the presentation is of prime importance and the letter takes second place" ("Unser Buch," *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*; Mainz, 1926-27).

In this picture-book Lissitzky experimented already with a variety of typefaces and sizes. This procedure would prove to impart such a marked playfulness to the optic-functional design of his later work. For instance, a large letter may serve as a plane for small letters, or two words may be joined together through a combination of larger and smaller letters. Such playful typography triggers the reader's activity.

A highlight of Lissitzky's typographic *oeuvre* and a landmark in the development of the new typography was his design for Mayakovsky's anthology of verse: *Dlja Golossa* (for reading out loud), 1923 (Fig. 5). The typographic compositions that accompany the text are done with a variety of composing material which Lissitzky distributed freely over the type area in two colors, red and black. With the booklet went a practical tabulator listing the distinctive marks of the various poems. Against the background of his conception of the optical impact of typography, the very arrangement of this collection of poems—with this title—must have been a real challenge to him. Here his typography has

grown to assume a very personal style, in which he has freed himself from the suprematic imagery of his previous works. The letter is treated as an element of composition and is oftentimes built of disconnected parts: broader and narrower lines that appear as independent elements in the typographic picture. He also does not shy away from applying different typefaces on one page and superimposing letters varying in position and size. The varied use of red and black makes for liveliness and clarity. In this connection Lissitzky, in "Unser Buch," quotes Marinetti: "I am opposed to what is commonly termed: the harmony of the type area. When necessary, we'll apply three or four different colors and twenty different typefaces on one page. Through italics, for instance, we'll indicate a sequence of equal, quick emotions; bold print will express exclamations, etc., etc. In this manner, a new pictorially typographic presentation of the printed sheet is achieved."

Futurism emancipated typography from the classic type area—often, however, to the detriment of legibility. Without sacrificing any of the dynamic vigor of Futurism, Lissitzky has given typography a solid undergirding by not only spelling out its function, but also by laying down a well-ordered form language and working method.

Mayakovsky's collection of poems directly affected Theo van Doesburg's typographic design of Schwitters' fairy-tale *Die Scheuche* (the scarecrow), 1925 (see K. Steinitz, *K. Schwitters*, 1963, p. 79). Blending in with the text, the illustrating figures that are playing over the type area, consist of letters. This procedure again inspired Lissitzky when making his *Four Rules of Arithmetic* (Fig. 6) in 1928.

Aside from these comparatively free compositions, Lissitzky also did commercially obligated typographic work, such as covers for magazines, etc. In these designs, his constructive side was more pronounced. Here, also, the dynamic composition has a meaningful function; see, for example, the banded diagonal of the cover for the magazine *Wjeschtsch* (1922) (Fig. 7).

Figure 5. *Dlja Golossa* (for reading out loud); 1923; proof; 15 x 24 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches (38 x 63 cm); coll. Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

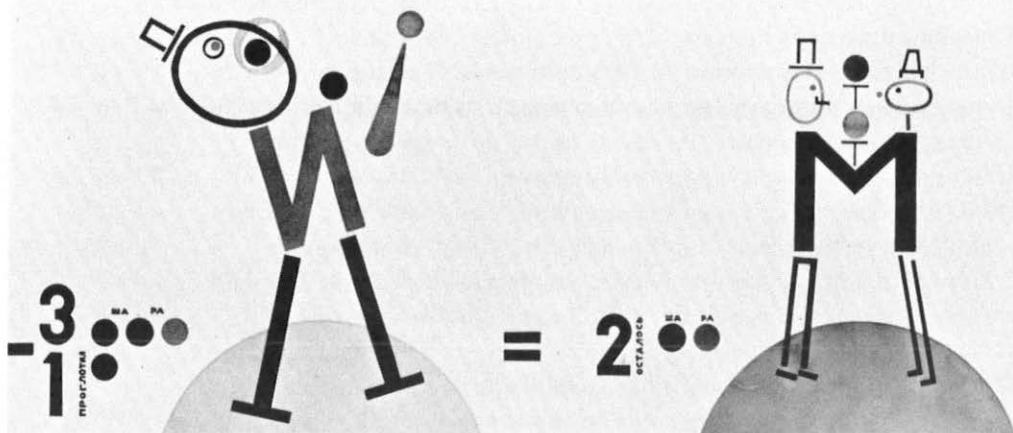


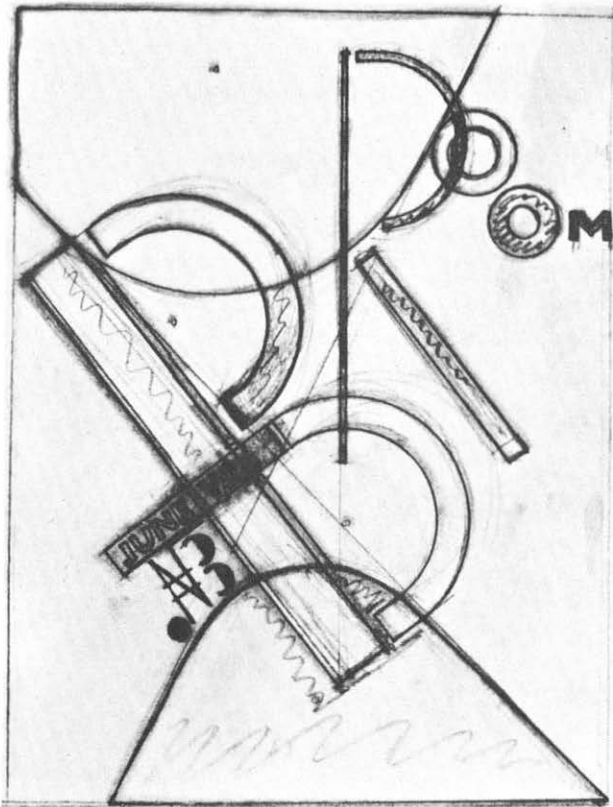
Figure 6. Design for *Four Rules of Arithmetic*; 1928; drawing, gouache; 9¼ x 24½ inches (23.5 x 62.5 cm); coll. E. Winter, London.

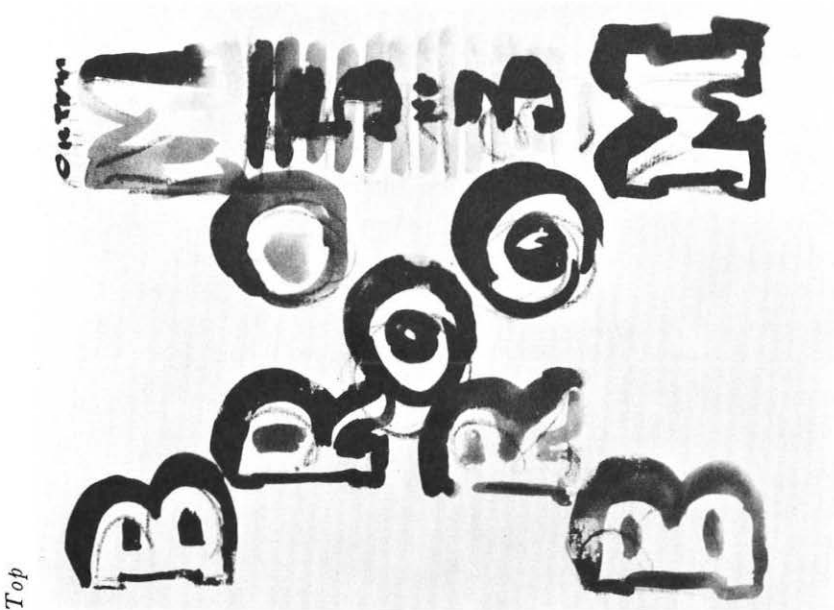
Figure 7. Cover design for the magazine *Wjeschtsch-Gegenstand-Objet*, number 1, 1922; 12⅓ x 9½ inches (31.3 x 23.6 cm); coll. Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.



Also in 1922 Lissitzky did a series of five designs each for the cover of the magazine *Broom* (Figs. 8–12). In these the trend toward greater clarity is very much in evidence. The first design is still fully consonant with the pictorial conception in the way the letters are composed, both individually and as a whole. The two hyperboles are even strictly outside the pale of typographic objectives—they are reminiscent of the use of hyperboles in his paintings. The next designs are tuned to the idea of plural legibility: whether the magazine is held straight, upside down, or viewed from the side the title always remains legible. In the last design of the series Lissitzky achieves a maximum of clarity. This series shows that the page is treated as a whole (like the canvas) and that the dynamic aspect appears in an increasingly controlled form until an equilibrium is reached.

Figure 8. Cover design for the magazine *Broom*; 1922; drawing; 10 x 7 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches (25.3 x 19.4 cm); coll. Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

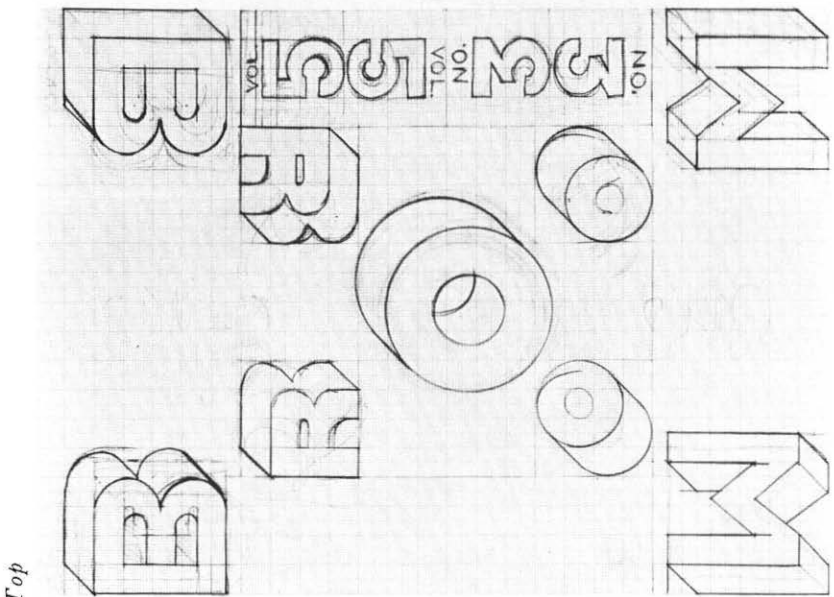




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Figure 9. Cover design for the magazine *Broom*; 1922; water color; 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches (22 x 35.3 cm); coll. Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

Figure 10. Cover design for the magazine *Broom*; 1922; drawing; 10 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches (27 x 20 cm); coll. Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.



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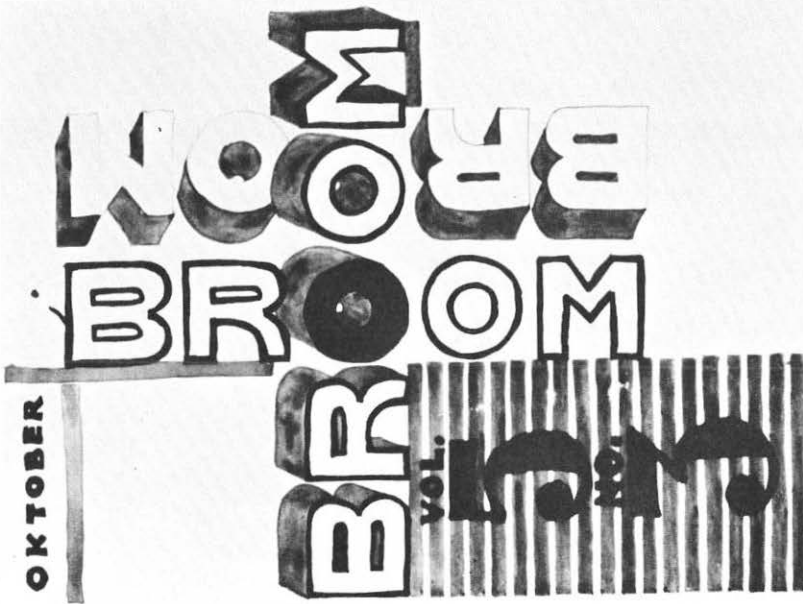


Figure 11. Cover design for the magazine *Broom*; 1922; ink, water color; $10\frac{7}{8} \times 8\frac{1}{8}$ inches (27.6 x 20.7 cm); coll. Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

Figure 12. Cover design for the magazine *Broom*; 1922; ink, water color; $10\frac{7}{8} \times 8\frac{1}{8}$ inches (27.6 x 20.7 cm); coll. Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

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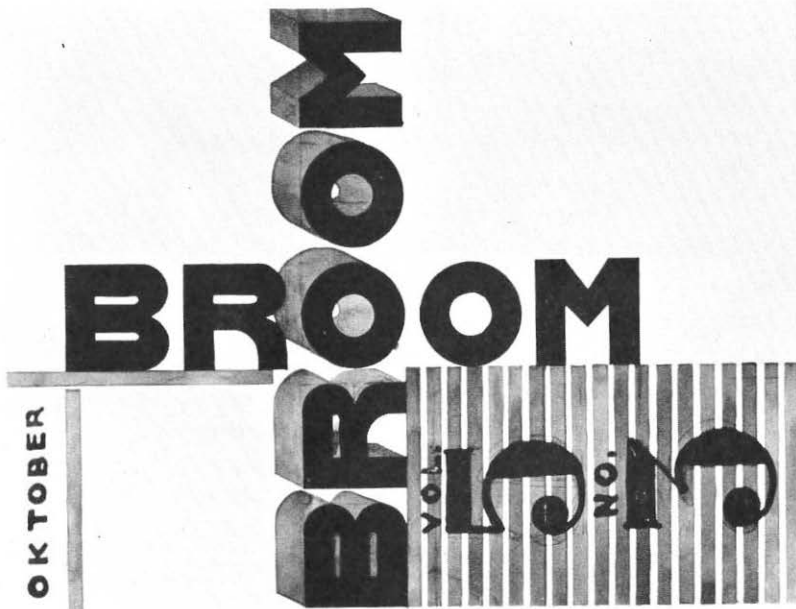


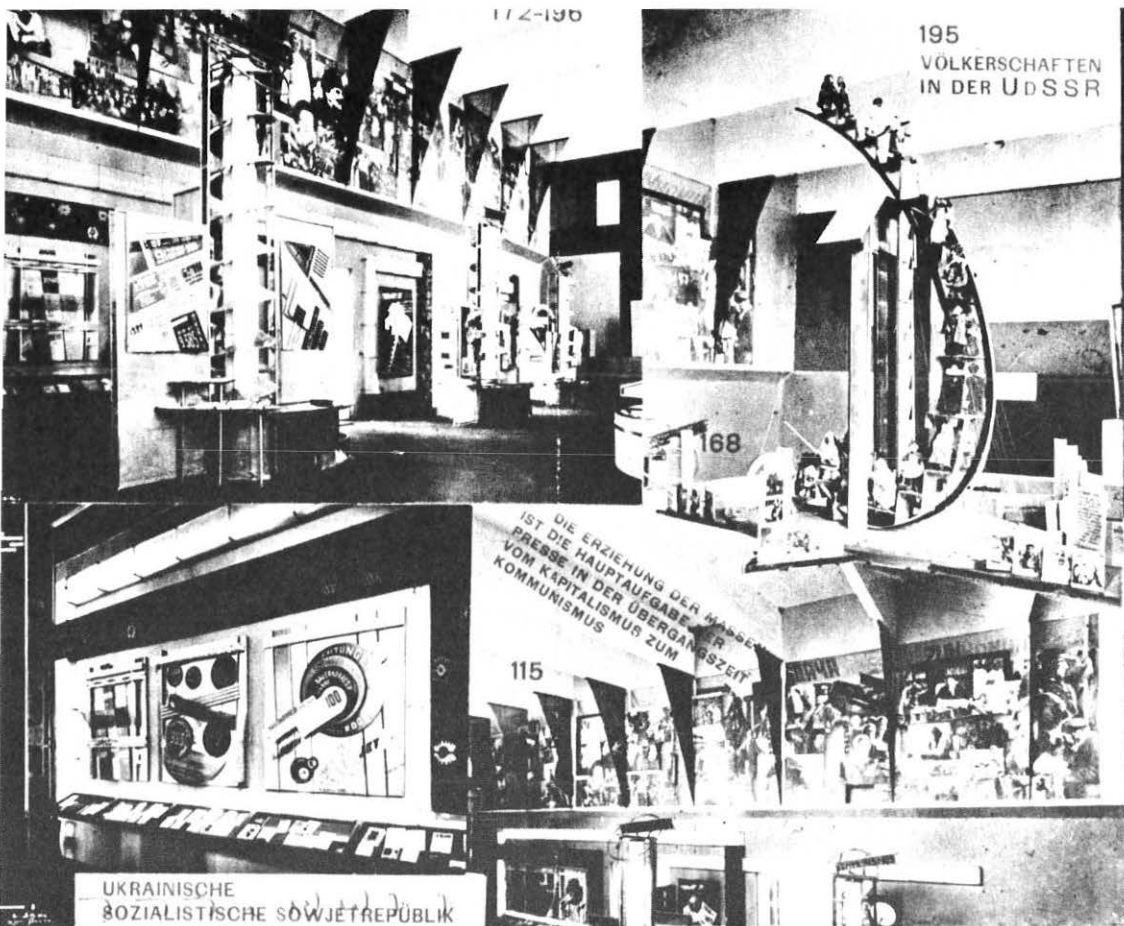


Figure 13.
Part of the exhibition
in the Russian Pavillion at
the International Press Exhibition,
Cologne, 1928; photograph.

Yet another category is concerned with the application of photography (including photogram and photomontage) in typography. Early examples are the Pelican designs of 1924.

Until well into the 1930's, photography was to play a growingly important part in Lissitzky's book designs. It was often applied in the form of photomontage; e.g., in *USSR Builds Socialism* (1932).

Lissitzky also used photomontage for typographic purposes in his so-called demonstrationrooms and exhibition halls. He was given the



official government assignment of designing the Russian pavillion at the International Press Exhibition at Cologne in 1928. For this he designed a frieze of photomontage measuring 24 by 3.5 meters (Fig. 13). It bespeaks his artistic inventiveness and imagination in that he managed to create a lively spatial atmosphere with the uninspiring means of monotonous propaganda material. The catalogue of the Russian contribution, also designed by Lissitzky, includes a series of photographs illustrating—in a typographic motion picture—the contents of the Soviet pavillion.

As indicated above, Lissitzky does not stand alone as a typographic innovator. There are many artists in the 1920's who, with him, have given typography a new look. As opposed to the typographic work of most of his contemporaries, however, Lissitzky's typography cannot be aligned with any specific movement. He cannot be bracketed with the Russian constructivists with their static, rather ponderous, typographic design nor with the Bauhaus style of typography which, under the leadership of Moholy Nagy, developed its own "underlined" features. There is a certain affinity with the Dutchman Piet Zwart in whose designs the diagonal plays a dominant part. Zwart, however, employs the diagonal so consistently as a recurrent element that its dynamic quality is obscured. Furthermore, their relationship appears from their application of photography in their typographic work.

Aside from these relationships, Lissitzky's typographic *oeuvre* evidences a strongly individual character. His versatility, which is apparent in his many activities, is also manifest in his varied and imaginative work in the limited field of typography. This liveliness and variety, anchored though in a strongly integrated conception, have shielded his work from getting bogged down in artistic dogmatism. These aspects of his art have helped to develop the outstanding quality of his typographic work.

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